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Detention Must Be Paid

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD JAN. 20, 2014

Millions of Americans can't find work and have lost their unemployment benefits because Congressional Republicans insist the government can't afford to help them. But there is no shortage of money when it comes to hunting down unauthorized immigrants.

The House on Wednesday passed a trillion-dollar appropriations bill that includes \$39 billion for the Department of Homeland Security, \$16 billion of which is for immigration enforcement, a sum that House Republicans boast "will allow for the highest operational force levels in history" for Customs and Border Protection, among other things. The bill adds 2,000 agents at border ports and mandates that Immigration and Customs Enforcement "maintain a level of not less than 34,000 detention beds through September 30, 2014." This represents, at a cost of \$2.8 billion, "the highest detention capacity in history."

It is mindless to keep throwing billions at border enforcement and detention at a time when illegal immigration is at historic lows, when other, more pressing government functions are being starved and when none of the money spent actually goes toward solving the problem.

Take the irrational obligation to fill all those detention beds, at a cost of about \$122 a day. Why make the people who run a vast and expensive law-enforcement apparatus responsible for keeping prison beds warm rather than communities safe — especially when there are low-cost alternatives to detention that don't involve fattening the bottom lines of for-profit prison corporations?

Congress's arbitrary detention mandates and the Obama administration's aggressive use of its enforcement powers have pushed deportations to record levels of 400,000 a year. This has had no discernible effect on the overall problem,

but it has caused abundant anguish in immigrant families and their communities.

What's most disheartening about the spending splurge is that it attacks only the symptoms of the ailing immigration system. It reflects a government cynically resigned to chipping away at the presence of millions of unauthorized immigrants, most of them noncriminals, instead of one willing to create a way for millions to come forward and get right with the law, freeing up taxpayer dollars to go after real threats.

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